Images of Criminals and Victims: A Study on Women’s Fear and Social Control

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IMAGES OF CRIMINALS AND VICTIMS
A Study on Women's Fear and Social Control

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Using two complementary qualitative methodologies—focus groups and in-depth interviews—this article explores women's fear of crime in a sample of 140 participants. The major argument is that women's fear is exacerbated by stereotypical images of criminals and victims. Although those images are not uniform, some common themes emerged from the participants' narratives: Dominant representations of criminals among all women are those of poor minority men: out-of-control evil strangers who randomly attack their victims. Among all women, images of victims are predominantly those of white middle-class women, who are innocent, submissive, and unable to protect themselves. The consequences of these images are explored in detail.

The literature on fear of crime considers it "paradoxical" that women have higher levels of fear of crime, even though their levels of victimization are lower than men (Clemente and Kleiman 1977; Ortega and Myles 1987; Stafford and Galle 1984; Warr 1984). Feminist scholars, however, have reported that women's fear is the result of living with a variety of acts of aggression, many of which are not recorded in the criminal statistics. Because the majority of these acts of intimidation and violence against women are committed by male assailants—many of whom are known to the victim—female fear is fear of male violence (Gordon and Riger 1991; Kelly 1991; Russell 1985; Stanko 1990, 1993).

This article advances the view that female fear is exacerbated by images and representations of crime contained in the prevailing ideology of crime (Hall et al. 1978). This ideology is shaped by popular images about what is criminal, who is more likely to commit a crime and who is more likely to become a victim, what are the connections between criminals and victims, where and when is a crime more likely to occur, and what are the best ways to control or prevent crime. These representations reflect "attitudes so deeply embedded in tradition as to appear natural" (Reiman 1995, 6), affecting women's—and men's—lives in a myriad of

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The ideas presented in this article have been developed at length in my book Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime on Women's Lives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


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ways: restricting leisure and professional activities and teaching what crimes to fear, where and when to be afraid, who is dangerous, and who is safe.

Feminist literature identifies a diversity of ways in which women's lives are coerced (Brooks Gardner 1995; Carlen 1994; Hanmer and Saunders 1984; Russell 1982, 1984, 1985; Smart 1995; Stanko 1985, 1990). Some studies deconstruct the discourse of femininity used in the informal and formal control of women. They focus on the "proper" role for women and men, the definitions of deviance and criminality as they relate to women, and the disciplining and policing of girls' behaviors (Cain 1989; Chesney-Lind 1995; Faith 1993; MacKinnon 1993; Rafter 1990). Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1978) focus on the public/private dichotomy, which identifies the home as a "safe haven" for women. Such division has resulted in major misunderstandings in the study of women as victims of criminal behavior. Although stereotypical images of crime and fear of crime focus on violence occurring in the public sphere, studies on domestic and intimate violence show that women's victimization most often occurs in private (Stanko 1993).

Fear of crime is one of the most oppressive and deceitful sources of informal social control of women. The images and representations that shape Americans' fear of crime and appear in everyday narratives are translated into a familiar discourse filled with stereotypical images of offenders, victims, and their interconnectedness. Our images of "ideal criminals" (Christie 1986)—or those individuals who are more likely to be given the status of criminal—are consistent with a traditional ideology of crime: Criminals are poor, minority men; uneducated; psychotic; or, more recently, immigrants.

Current representations of crime also contain images of victims and of the connections between victims and offenders. "Ideal victims" (Christie 1986, 18) are those who, when affected by crime, are more frequently given the "legitimate status" of victim. Images of criminals and victims are intertwined. As Christie (1986, 25) points out, "the more ideal a victim is, the more ideal becomes the offender." Representations of ideal criminals and ideal victims mold our apprehensions and feed our anxieties, shaping the content of the everyday discourse on crime (Humphries and Caringella-MacDonald 1990).

Images of nonideal victims are also an important element in the social construction of the fear of crime. Lisa Frohmann's (1991) ethnographic study on the prosecution of sexual assault crimes (1991) shows how prosecutors' decisions to reject or accept cases are oriented, among others, by factors related to the relationship between the victim and the offender and the victim's behavior and her personal life. Women who are assaulted by offenders known to them and who violate appropriate codes of behavior, such as being on the streets at night or being alcohol and drug users, are more likely to be considered nonideal victims and are frequently discredited by prosecutors.

Sally Merry (1981), in her book *Urban Danger: Life in a Neighborhood of Strangers*, explains how fear of crime among white, Black, and Chinese residents in a racially mixed neighborhood in Philadelphia contributes to divisions among groups along racial lines. Crime is an "idiom" that serves to legitimiz
strangers and unknown persons. As racial and ethnic networks share information about crime, they influence residents’ presumptions of who is safe and who is dangerous.

I advance the thesis that images of criminals and victims reinforce racial divisions, increasing the disparity between men and women as well as among people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. My major argument is that popular representations associated with safe and dangerous situations, harmless and menacing individuals, and “good” and “bad” victims reinforce overlapping hierarchies of power, amplifying social distances among different groups and severely limiting women’s daily activities.

This study examines popular images of criminals and victims in a group of women of different ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It focuses on the ways in which the social location of women affects these images. This study also explores the possibility that those women who hold qualities that match popular representation of the ideal victim will report a more heightened awareness to crime than those who do not fit such images.

**METHODOLOGY**

Between the fall of 1994 and the summer of 1995, I conducted 18 focus groups and 30 in-depth interviews in New York City and surrounding suburban areas with white, African American, and Latina women of different ages. The women were from different socioeconomic backgrounds: from a group of homeless African American teenagers in Manhattan to a group of white upper-middle-class women in the suburbs of northern New Jersey and upstate New York. There were a total of 140 participants in the study.

These complementary qualitative methodologies are aimed at gaining access to the way women construct and express their views about images of crimes, criminals, victims, and their interconnections. The in-depth interviews and the focus groups lasted between one and two hours each. The questions were included in a discussion guide. The guide was flexible enough to listen to the language of the women, allowing the discussion to move in a direction that was meaningful to the participants while keeping a certain structure to permit comparison between the groups. The groups were homogeneous in terms of age, race, gender, and socioeconomic background. From the total sample of 140 participants in the focus groups and in-depth interviews, 43 were white, 38 African American, and 59 Latina (Black, white, and mixed women of Latin origin). The age distribution was 47 teenagers (ages 13-19), 62 adults (ages 20-59), and 31 seniors (60 and older). The sample, therefore, overrepresents the number of women of color and teenage women. This was intentional because most studies on fear of crime underrepresent these groups, and very few even consider teenagers and Latinas. Thus, it was critical to give special attention to these women.
The individuals were recruited through contacts with community organizations and institutions in New York and northern New Jersey. In general, I contacted a person who organized the groups. The participants in the groups were women affiliated or related to organizations such as soup kitchens of alternative high schools. The sample, therefore, is one of availability and convenience, recruited through a revised process of snowballing (Morse 1992).

FINDINGS

Images of Typical Criminals

Several themes emerged from the participants’ responses. First, it became evident throughout this study that, regardless of the race and socioeconomic background of the women, the images of criminals are strongly racialized, with Black and Latino men being uppermost in the fears of most women. During a discussion with a group of white middle-class college students in upstate New York, Gloria, one of them, said,

Oh, I just feel bad. I feel that anything that comes to my mind when you ask that question is . . . [hesitantly], I think of a thin, tall Black man. I know that it is a stereotypical image that is in the media, but that is the image that comes to my mind.

Gloria’s words reflect the deep influence of these images. As an educated woman she understands that those are stereotypical representations of criminals. Being aware of these stereotypical images, however, does not resolve the problem: It is still the first portrait that comes to her mind. These images were not only reported by white women. Gladys, a dark-skinned Latina woman, said, “I am afraid of Black and Hispanic people and they are my people.” African American women described similar feelings to that of white and Latina women. For example, Meredith, one of the participants in a discussion group, said, lowering her voice, almost whispering,

I feel ashamed by saying this, but the image that comes to my mind when I think about criminals is that of a brother.

Another participant in the same group, Mary, a 26-year-old college student, recounted vividly what happened during the aftermath of a shooting in the Long Island Rail Road. Her story exemplifies the way she believes the media portray images of Black men accused of committing crimes as inhuman, creating a racialized and objectified image of criminals.

I am talking about what happened in the Long Island Rail Road with . . . what is his name . . . Colin Ferguson. The image that the media presented is that he is an animal, a monster. . . . The next day I took the same train. You should have seen how people were looking at each other very strangely, in fear. . . . You know that they were reading about it, you know that they are conversing about it. People in their coffee shops were talking about it. . . . But, it was like . . . a racial division. In my school,
the white professors, they were in their coffee shops talking about it. It affected them in a certain way. And it affected me and my friends who are Black in a different way. . . . The day it happened I read the whole story and I thought . . . oh God, now every time a Black person enters in the damn trains all the whites are going to go OOOOOOOHHHHHHH! Here we go again! This crime was horrendous, and yes, Ferguson is a Black man. But the way the media presented it was something that separated the races.

A second image that emerged was that of criminals as animalistic, as savages or monsters. Lombrosian images of offenders as prehuman have been a persistent theme in the literature since biocriminological theories emerged in the 19th century. These images were particularly evident among white middle- and working-class senior women. Kathy and Rose, two white women in their late 70s who live in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, shared with other members of the focus group:

To me, the image of a criminal is that man . . . that monster, who shot all those people on the train and then made his own defense.

That is the most scary thing of all. . . . Because you know that people like Ferguson are mentally unbalanced and people on drugs are also mentally unbalanced. . . . Most criminals are unbalanced. There is no way that you can reach at them . . . when the people are mentally disturbed, they do not know what they are doing.

Kathy and Rose’s words reflect a multifaceted image. First, criminals are insane or “unbalanced.” This was a very common theme among the participants who, on several occasions, used similar words to describe criminals: monsters, crazy, insane, mad, maniac, nuts, cracked, bizarre, weird. Second, criminals are out of control. The victim is completely helpless and at the mercy of these “mentally disturbed” persons. The representation that Kathy and Rose used was one of a mass murderer, Colin Ferguson. This image contrasts with the reality of crime. From the criminal statistics, we know that mass murders, such as the one committed by Colin Ferguson, are an extremely rare occurrence (Fox and Levin 1994). When these events occur, however, the media bombard and saturate readers and viewers with reports about the incident, re-creating images of atavistic criminals. Politicians also jump on the bandwagon of the moral panic that such events provoke, promising a frightened public that if we had voted for them, this would have never occurred.

Comparable images were depicted by some of the participants, who described criminals as hanging around with other criminals or “in bunches,” as Isabel, an elderly Latina woman who lives in lower Manhattan, said. “Ten, twenty, thirty, they are always together.” “Yes, like in a pack,” Gloria, another Latina woman, responded. This Darwinian representation is another piece in the mosaic of fears of several participants, who mentioned being afraid of Black and Latino teenagers who dress as “gangstas” and hang out in groups como animales (like animals), as one Latina participant remarked.

A popular theme that was also mentioned, particularly by elderly white working-class women, was that of criminals as immigrants, more specifically, new immi-
grants. Gene, Pat, and Pam, three elderly working-class white women who live on the lower East Side of Manhattan, shared their views with the group:

The whole problem is the kind of people that you have in this country today. When my parents came ... that type of person was different. Now, we have people that do not have respect for themselves and that is the whole problem. They are the ones that commit all the crimes.

They just want to come to our country and live on welfare. They do not want to work. All they want is to live off of us. That is why they commit crimes. They are too lazy to work.

Extending our arms to everybody. Come here and we'll feed you! [lifting her arms toward the ceiling]. That's why we have so much crime. Golden shrine. . . . Do you know? Wrong! That is the whole problem.

This emotional depiction of criminals presents in a “package” several intertwined racialized and class images: Criminals are “new immigrants”—a code word for dark-skinned immigrants—and are lazy, poor, dirty, wanting to live off of others, garbage, on welfare, and do not respect anyone.

A fourth image of criminals presented by some participants was of people who lack any human compassion. Leida, a 30-year-old Latina participant, connected the word criminal to una persona mala (a bad person) or someone a quien no le importa nada ni nadie (who does not care about anything or anyone). Other women used similar expressions, reflecting on the common theme that criminals lack human sentiments, as Rafaela Garofalo, a contemporary of Lombroso, stated during the late 19th century (Vold and Bernard 1986, 42-5). Criminals are “cruel,” “inhuman,” “immoral,” “evil” individuals. This imagery, in which oversimplified assumptions of someone as “good” and “bad” are constructed and transmitted, becomes part of public consciousness and is woven in a complicated tapestry of class, racial, and gendered images with notions of goodness and badness.

Horror stories with decapitated bodies and tortured victims were commonly narrated, mostly by white middle-class young women. Sandra, a white middle-class junior college student, shared with the group her horror story:

My biggest fear is to be randomly taken away and my body to be found in a forest or in a ditch, you know, and have my family saying: “I thought she just went to the store, but she never returned.” You know ... that is really scary. I mean, the very thought that any time I am walking anywhere, and some lunatic can take control of you and kill you and end your life like that. And, many times they rape and torture you before killing you. . . . That is the worst.

I then asked Sandra, “How likely do you think that an incident like that can happen to you?” She responded, “I really do not know, but it seems very real to me.” These gendered, horror-producing, mass-mediated images (Barak 1994) portray criminals as cruel, inhuman, and violent men who are strangers. “Definitely I am afraid of strange men,” a student told me. “A man can overpower you,” another young woman said to the group, “but I can beat up another woman,” she added.
Images of Victims

Images of criminals as minority, poor, on welfare, and immigrants are nothing new. Much less attention, however, has been given to stereotypical images of victims and their influence on women’s fears. Although official statistics on victimization show that men are more likely to be the victims of any violent street crime—except rape—than women (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995a), the majority of the respondents—irrespective of their race, age, and socioeconomic background—said that women were more likely to be victimized: “women, of course,” Jenny, a white woman in her early 20s, decisively voiced. A very small fraction of the women interviewed said that the gender of the victim did not matter; only a handful of mainly African American women said that men were more likely to be the victims of a crime than women. In a focus group of white middle-class women, Judith, a woman in her 20s, said that “the typical victim is for sure a woman.” “Any story in particular?” I asked. Heather, another participant, responded:

What I have in mind is the group of women who were killed at the University of Florida a couple of years ago. Because my first group of friends had gone to college and I have quite a few friends at the University of Florida and . . . when I think of a victim I think about these women. Because there were four women in their college apartment, getting ready to start a new semester and a man living in the woods came into their home and brutally murdered them. And I think of them as the victims because they are the average American living in their house, unaware, unsuspecting about what can possibly happen to them, and just happened. (emphasis added)

Heather’s story is quite revealing for several reasons. First, from all possible images of victims, she chose to talk about a life situation that is quite similar to hers. This was a very typical response. Many of the stories shared by the participants were closely related to the life circumstances of the woman narrating it. Heather is a college student, as were the women at the University of Florida. Second, the image of the criminal perfectly fits the image of an “ideal criminal”: a stranger—literally—living in the woods, probably unemployed and “weird.” Third, the women in Heather’s narrative fit the representation of the ideal victim: the average—a code word for white middle-class American women—involved in a very respectable activity: going to college.

Images of victims presented by a small fraction of participants reflected some specific situational disadvantages: being poor, women of color, and immigrants. An undocumented Latina, Elizabeth, shared a story that reflects well the isolation and vulnerability that she feels and its relation to her image of “the victim”:

I heard an incident in the radio Latina about a woman who was killed in her apartment. She screamed for help and the neighbors heard someone screaming. But, they could not understand what she was saying because she was yelling in Spanish. She was 25 years old and she yelled and yelled for help and no one came. They should have come anyway, to see what was happening. But they did nothing.

The relationship among victimization, fear of crime, and being an immigrant has not been studied. The words of Elizabeth, however, give us a glimpse of the
fears that immigrant women face. Separated from their extended families and their communities, Latina women feel especially débiles or vulnerable. Even if they yell for help, their cries are unheard because people cannot understand them. This is an extremely powerful and emotionally appealing representation in the minds of many Latina women. Several of them mentioned the language barrier in association with their fear of crime. Maria and Elena, two Latinas in their 30s, said,

Me dá mucho miedo que alguien me trate de robar y que yo no entienda lo que ellos quieren (I am afraid of someone trying to rob me and that I cannot understand what they want from me). Esta idea me aterroriza porque me pueden hasta matar (This idea terrifies me because they can even kill me).

Sí, nosotras estamos muy limitadas, porque no sabemos la lengua (Yes, we are very limited because we don’t speak the language). Si algo nos pasa no podemos ni pedir ayuda (If something happens to us we cannot even ask for help). El otro día me robaron la cartera y, pues, que iba yo a hacer? Como no tengo ni papeles, me quedé con la rabia (The other day they stole my purse, and what am I supposed to do? Since I don’t have documents, I just kept my anger to myself). Ahora tengo más miedo, pero me cuidó más (Now I am more afraid, but also more careful).

Undocumented women feel especially vulnerable because they cannot report their victimization incidents to the police for fear of deportation. Therefore, they must remain silent about the crimes committed against them at home and in the streets. As Elena suggests, this makes them more fearful and more cautious, limiting their lives even more.

Several younger women, especially African American and white teenagers, mentioned innocence as an important trait pertaining to the ideal victim. “To me victims are like little Pollyannas,” Margaret, a white teenager, suggested during an in-depth interview:

I imagine a blond girl, like . . . from the Midwest, with a ponytail, naive, unaware, walking down the street in New York City, singing laralaralarara.

Besides the innocence and candor expressed in the image of Pollyanna, Margaret chose the figure of a Midwestern girl or a “mainstream American girl”: a white, kind, virtuous, and family-oriented young woman.

Although a handful of women reported that the race of the victim did not matter, the majority of participants, regardless of their race, age, and socioeconomic background, reported that white women were more likely to be the victims of crime than Black or Latina women. Criminal statistics indicate, however, that Black women are more likely to be victimized than white women (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995b). White middle-class women, however, match the image of the ideal victim prevalent in the hegemonic ideology of crime. “White women are more often victims because they do not know how to scream,” said Melinda, an African American teenager. Yvette, another African American teenager, expressed her views: “The majority of the scared women are white, that is the truth.” She said that white women look scared when passing by Black men and sometimes when passing by Black women “like us,” she concluded. Because Yvette is a homeless
teenager, the implication is that white women also feel scared of poor Black teenage women.

Latina teenagers expressed similar ideas. In a lively discussion in one of the focus groups in Brooklyn, New York, they remarked:

White women are more victims because they do not know how to fight.
We do, we know how to take care of ourselves.
This is why they do not mess with us.
But white girls are afraid of everybody, of Latinos, of Blacks. This is why they are more victims. They have it worse.

White women fit more closely the gendered, racist, and classist concept of “femininity” (Klein 1995). They are taught not to get involved in physical squabbles. Only “bad girls”—or poor girls of color—do. Images of victims contribute to the social definition of “good” and “bad” women. Good women obey the codes of behavior and do not fight. Therefore, they should stay in because they do not know how to protect themselves. Bad women do not follow those codes. Therefore, they have to fight to protect themselves.

The virtual absence of Black and Latina women as victims in the media (Benedict 1992) influences fear of crime in several ways. In this study, white women expressed more frequently being afraid of crime than Black and Latina women. This difference was especially evident among teenagers, with white middle-class teenagers expressing more fear than Black and Latina teenagers. In addition, the image of a white woman as the ideal victim is closely related to the idea of “white womanhood” and the need to preserve it. Black and Latina women’s virtue is not as important: They are nonideal or “worthless” victims, unless they share common qualities with white middle-class victims. To be recognized as victims, Black and Latina women have to show that they are better than the rest of their kind: better mothers, students, more religious, more virtuous, and so on (Madriz 1997).

Another theme that was mentioned by a handful of participants was the relationship between victimization and the size of a woman. Jody, a 15-year-old woman, stated,

I think the size has a lot to do with it. Tiny women, like me, are more likely to be victims. Especially tiny women who walk around looking as if they are totally out of it.

Short women match stereotypical images of weakness and vulnerability. Shortness and tallness have to do with qualities regarded as feminine and masculine in our culture. Cinderella had small feet, symbolizing her femininity. Songs in Spanish popular culture talk of small women, with cinturas y pies pequeños (small feet and waists) as the personification of the “perfect woman.”

Although 75 percent of lone-offender violence and 45 percent of violence involving multiple offenders are perpetrated by someone known to the victim (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995b), a pervasive theme among women—irrespective of their
social location—was that women were mainly victimized by strangers. Children were also represented as victims of random violence committed by strangers, although the reality is that many acts of victimization against them occur while in the hands of their parents or guardians. A study by Richard Gelles and Murray Strauss (1979), for example, showed that between 1.4 and 1.9 million children in the United States are victims of physical abuse by their parents every year.

**Women as Victims of Sexual Attacks**

Most stories and images depicted by the participants made reference to women as victims of murders or sexual attacks, specifically rape, although a few mentioned sexual harassment on the streets as a form of victimization. Although women are victims of many other crimes—property crimes and other violent crimes, such as mugging and domestic violence—the depiction of women as predominantly victims of sexual attacks reproduces the idea that what is important about women is their sexuality (Faith 1993).

Many of the stories shared by the participants in this study presented crimes as individual, bizarre cases of random violence, without considering in their analysis structural factors such as misogyny, patriarchy, or gender-based privileges. Indeed, a large number of women expressed a blaming attitude toward the victims. With very few exceptions, this attitude was more prevalent among white middle-class older women than among working-class young Black or Latina women. For instance, during a focus group with elderly middle-class white women, several of them expressed their feelings about women as responsible for their own victimization:

This may be old-fashioned thinking too . . . what I have heard through the years . . . you take the young girls today . . . I think . . . oh! They are inviting trouble . . . look how some of them act when they are out on the streets . . . how they dress, leaving nothing to the imagination, and I only think about what my mama used to say . . . you know they are looking for trouble. A decent girl should not dress like that.

Yes, I agree. Especially in these days women use these tights, showing everything. And then they complain if men look or grab them or if they tell them something they don’t want to hear.

Especially some of the young . . . well, Black and Hispanic girls. They like to wear those very tight pants . . . or too short miniskirts.

They look for it. Yes, I think they like the attention. And men, you know how they are. . . . These women are inviting trouble.

These expressions not only reflect the idea that women who do not follow a certain dress code are to be blamed for the harassment and attacks that they receive, but they are also class and race based. In these images, most white middle-class women are considered to dress decently, but lower-class Black and Latina women are presumed to like showing their bodies, and they are considered “vamps.” Therefore, if they are victimized, they are considered nonideal victims.
Young Latina and African American lower-class women were less likely to exhibit a blaming-the-victim attitude. They were also more likely to express their belief that a woman has the right to dress the way she wants. Clara, an African American teenager, was emphatic in her assertion that “we are not harming anybody, you know. . . . I dress the way I want,” she concluded. Other expressions used by Latina teenagers were “a woman has the right to dress the way she wants,” “men dress the way they want, no?” or “no matter the way you dress, men harass you anyway, so why bother?” Middle-class white and African American teenagers, however, were more cautious in expressing their belief that, “although women should dress the way they want, men follow girls that dress as a hooker,” Melinda, an African American teenager, claimed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although it is clear that women do not have unified images of criminals and victims, some common themes were reported by the majority of the participants. Among others, there is the belief that there are attributes pertaining to ideal criminals and to ideal and nonideal victims. The participants’ images summarized in Table 1 indicate the racialized, class, and gendered nature of these images.

Regardless of the race and socioeconomic background of the participants in this study, images of criminals are those of Black poor men, and images of victims are predominantly those of white middle-class women. Second, according to many of the participants, ideal criminals and ideal victims can be recognized by their physical characteristics. While ideal criminals are “weird,” dirty, tall, and big, ideal victims look “normal,” small, and tiny. Third, concurrent with the prevalent ideology of crime, criminals also differ from “us” morally or psychologically: They are dehumanized, immoral, animalistic, irrational, violent strangers—mainly murderers and rapists—who attack their victims randomly and in the streets. On the contrary, ideal victims are fragile, good, innocent, vulnerable women, unknown to the criminal and attacked—kidnapped, killed, or raped—unexpectedly.

A direct consequence of the dehumanized images of criminals is that they restrict any type of public empathy toward those who break the law. This lack of empathy favors a social climate in which more repressive policies directed toward criminals are sanctioned: tougher laws, the use of the death penalty, and opposition to rehabilitation and community programs.

Women’s lives are not only controlled by images of ideal criminals and ideal victims but also by images of nonideal or undeserving victims. These are those women who do not follow appropriate codes of behavior: They dress provocatively or engage in behaviors considered inappropriate for women. Some of these images are mediated by the social position of the participants. For instance, as reported by white middle-class elderly women, representations of nonideal victims are clearly associated with poor Black and Latina young women who do not follow appropriate codes of behavior set for women. Poor Black and Latina women, however, were
TABLE 1: Images of Ideal Criminals and Ideal Victims Reported by the Majority of Participants

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideal Criminals</th>
<th>Ideal Victims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender, race, and class</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female, children</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blacks, Latinos</td>
<td>Whites</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor, on welfare, lazy,</td>
<td>Middle class, hard working,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;new immigrants&quot;</td>
<td>average American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical attributes</td>
<td>Look &quot;weird,&quot; dirty</td>
<td>Look &quot;normal,&quot; dress properly</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big, tall</td>
<td>Small, tiny</td>
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<td>Psychological/</td>
<td>Bad, immoral, cruel, undeserving</td>
<td>Good, decent, deserving</td>
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<td>moral attributes</td>
<td>Animals, inhuman, irrational, insane</td>
<td>Innocent, naive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Violent, out of control, alcoholics, insane</td>
<td>Passive, vulnerable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation criminal/</td>
<td>Strangers to the victims</td>
<td>Strangers to the criminal</td>
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<tr>
<td>victim</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristics related</td>
<td>Attacks randomly in the streets</td>
<td>Unexpected victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to the crime</td>
<td>Violent predators</td>
<td>Harmless victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Murderers and sexual criminals</td>
<td>Kidnapped, killed, tortured, raped</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Images of nonideal victims were also reported by a handful of participants. These images are predominantly associated with poor young women of color who do not adhere to strict codes of behavior set for them.

less likely to express this blaming-the-victim attitude toward other women who break rigid codes of behavior set for them.

An important consequence of the stereotypical images of criminals and victims is that they explain, at least partially, why domestic crimes are not considered "serious crimes"—they do not fit prevalent images of ideal criminals and ideal victims (Christie 1986, 20). Domestic crimes are often committed by someone known to the victim and in the "sacredness" of their home. They explain also why white-collar and political crimes are not usually considered "serious crimes." White-collar criminals do not match images of ideal criminals because they are often middle-class white "respectable" men (Sutherland 1983).

These prevalent depictions of criminal and victim oversimplify and distort the reality of crime (Fattah 1986). For example, popular representations of women as victims reinforce the belief that women have the monopoly on submissiveness and men on aggression, that men have control of the streets, and women belong in the home. In addition, prevailing images of white women as ideal or credible victims explain why crimes committed against women of color are not seen as "real crimes" (Estrich 1987). Women of color do not fit classist and racist stereotypical notions of the ideal victim.
As this study shows, images of criminals and victims are not totally polarized. Situational disadvantages, such as being an immigrant and undocumented and not speaking English fluently, shape feelings of vulnerability and apprehension that heighten the expectation among some Latinas that they are more likely to be the victims of crime. Poor Latina women's views of victims are shaped by their social position: They are at the bottom of the gender, class, and racial hierarchies. In addition, they are immigrants and they don't speak English. Thus, their images and expectations are shaped by the concurrent disadvantages of Latinas.

Women's lives are controlled by images contained in the ideology of crime in different ways. First, images of the ideal victims reinforce stereotypical ideas of women as unable to defend themselves against cruel, inhuman, and insane predators. Men are stronger and more aggressive, and women are weak and passive. Second, images of ideal and nonideal victims have implicit a code of behavior (Hall et al. 1978): avoid the streets, stay inside, avoid strangers, dress properly. This code of behavior teaches comportment deemed "respectable" for women and conduct acceptable for men, legitimizing gender differences in the name of "keeping you safe" and reinforcing the private = women/public = men dichotomy. Third, these images teach women that there are "dangerous" and "safe" men. In reality, the latter—husbands, boyfriends, and acquaintances—are more likely to victimize women. Fourth, these stereotypical images reinforce the "horror story syndrome" (Walker 1985) by presenting images of women being tortured, mutilated, or raped as if they were commonplace, when the reality is that—in statistical terms—these are rare occurrences. Fifth, images of women as predominantly victims of sexual attacks reproduce the idea that what is important about women is their sexuality (Faith 1993). In the academic world, this has had the sum effect of pushing the research agenda on women predominantly toward only one set of crimes: sexual crimes. Finally, the representations of the ideal victims as white middle-class women imply that when Black and Latina women are victimized, they do not receive the same sympathy and credibility that is granted to white female victims because they do not match images of the ideal victim.

NOTES

1. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.
2. In December 1993, Colin Ferguson, a Caribbean immigrant, opened fire against commuters on a Long Island railroad car in New York, killing 6 people and wounding more than 12 before he was subdued by some passengers. This crime is a good example of the representation of the "ideal criminal" because Ferguson is a Black man, and most of his victims were white.

REFERENCES


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